

The original problem

Health and Welfare officials repeatedly labelled people disabled by pollution as deluded, suffering psychosomatic symptoms as a result of psychological stress. The statements were insupportable. In fact they contradicted many studies and practices of the time.

The statements had a devastating effect on people's lives. Families broke up, professional reputations were ruined, careers ended, and the resulting frustration led to several suicides.

Officials approached in Health and Welfare demonstrated bigotry by insisting on their beliefs, without any supporting evidence, long after other authorities had expressed concern and taken action on the problem.

In short, the response of the authorities was a bigger problem than the problem itself.

Stonewalling and evasion

Every attempt to ask Health and Welfare to accept responsibility for the consequences of its own actions was dealt with dishonorably. In the first nine months, despite having been informed of several suicides, the minister's office referred dozens of representations to inappropriate officials and even to other agencies.

In a meeting with a representative of the largest self-help group and myself, a ministerial aide suggested we clean up the misconceptions created by the department ourselves. After some protest, she offered to continue making representations in the Minister's office, providing "ongoing liaison". Six weeks later, when she quit, the file was abandoned and we along with it.

It took another nine months to achieve even a phone conversation with someone in the minister's office, during which time I was again referred to public servant after public servant, each saying he or she was not mandated to deal with the problem. Several sympathetic officials, instead of bringing the concern to Mr. Epp, suggested we go to the media to get the department off our backs.

Finally, after other cabinet ministers wrote Mr. Epp on our behalf, I managed to have a phone conversation with an aide. She promised a review of the subject, informing me that the department had not even read the Thomson report (from Ontario), despite the fact that it was a year old and copies had been sent to ministerial officials, (and despite the suicides).

When the period of the supposed review was up, I received a letter signed by Mr. Epp which misrepresented the position of the

Canadian Medical Association (they later called him on it in writing), misrepresented the purpose of the Thomson Report, and displayed bias in a number of ways obvious to anyone familiar with content analysis.

The mistakes, bias, and potential damaging effect of attitudes in the letter were pointed out to the aide. She apologized, but denied a request for corrections setting the record straight. Frustrated with what I perceived as irresponsibility on a life and death issue, I pleaded with the aide to contact one or more of the eight self-help groups across the country. This request was also refused, despite my making the appeal in writing, and supplying the addresses of self-help and professional groups concerned.

During this period Health and Welfare officials were continuing to make damaging statements, apparently disregarding articles in scientific literature listed in bibliographies supplied to the department. Officials were also unable or unwilling to provide the names of any doctors supporting their theory that the problem was psychosomatic, or any credible supporting studies. It seemed they were just shooting us from the hip.

The minister apparently ignored requests from more than a dozen cabinet ministers to look into the concern, sent by officials in other cabinet ministers offices who were aware that Health and Welfare statements were a considerable problem, and signed by their ministers. Mr. Epp's replies consistently ignored the issue raised, that of suicides resulting from attitudes fostered by health officials themselves.

The appeal to cabinet

About half way through the year-and-a-half experience above I began appealing to all of cabinet, including the Deputy Prime Minister and Prime Minister. As mentioned, several cabinet ministers appealed to Mr. Epp. Paul Dick and Flora MacDonald wrote the health minister in early 1986. After a census boycott, several news releases and media articles, and a tax boycott, several other cabinet ministers also wrote Mr. Epp, including Joe Clark, Monique Vezina, Michel Cote, Andre Bissonnette, Ray Hnatyshyn, John Wise, Elmer Mackay, James Kelleher, Benoit Bouchard, Tom Hockin, John Crosbie, Marcel Masse, Pat Carney, and Jean Charest.

Aides in Tom McMillan and David Crombie's offices, understanding the problem with Health and Welfare statements, pulled strings to get funding for a national conference of people affected in April 1987. Both aides said that the fact their ministers were involved in funding the conference might help us in efforts to get Health and Welfare to deal with the consequences of their previous statements.

Finally, in desperation, I appealed to the Deputy Prime Minister's Office. An aide promised me communication with Mr. Epp would be opened up, but then a subsequent letter received from the health minister's office didn't even acknowledge the concern being raised, let alone deal with it.

I appealed to the Prime Ministers office, speaking with about a half-dozen officials. Once, when a news release was going out, I asked press assistant if the PMO knew people were killing themselves as a result of attitudes fostered by the health department. She said "I assume they know. You've been perfectly clear." Astounded by the cruelty involved, I asked why nothing was happening. She replied "It's hard. I've tried. I feel really badly."

David Crombie had informed me about the "Prime Minister's strategy to help disabled people, announced in the Throne Speech of 1985." When I asked officials in the Prime Minister's office how this strategy might apply to us I was told there was no strategy, that cabinet ministers were allowed to do what ever they felt like about the disabled. Mr. Mulroney's office also ignored a written representation by Jean Charest on our behalf.

Leading up to the conference in April 1987, I appealed once again to the DPMO for a non-adversarial resolution. "Never mind the damages caused by the health minister," I pleaded, "no-one will come down on him if he would just join the other cabinet ministers supporting us." The aide responded by saying "You don't want compromise. You want victory." He refused to discuss the issue further.

Further appeals, same experience

The irresponsible, insupportable, and devastating comments continued throughout. The minister had expressed acceptance of the illness, had been repeatedly informed of the problems being caused by his own officials, including the suicides, yet his only response was to say that "health care is a provincial concern."

I had started out thinking that such an issue would be a non partisan issue, particularly considering the fact that John Diefenbaker had the illness. I hadn't expected the stonewalling and cover-up. But it was becoming apparent the minister would rather see people disabled by pollution killing themselves in frustration than be seen to have egg on his face.

It seemed the Mulroney government, in a time when the environment was becoming a mainstream concern, didn't want to be associated with the fact that thousands of Canadians are disabled by pollution, or with the fact that our biggest problem had come, not from the illness, but from misconceptions fostered by government.

In a period when minister after minister was resigning in disgrace, it seemed the PMO couldn't afford the embarrassment of pointing out to Mr. Epp that he was, in fact, responsible for the consequences of his department's actions. Cabinet's resolve to conform to principles of unity seemed to intensify after Health and Welfare told people with environmental sensitivity in Pincher Creek that they did not have a medical problem, but were possibly imagining their symptoms due to stress...an astounding repeat of precisely the problem I had originally complained about which was all the more stunning because it came after the minister had been repeatedly informed that it was happening, and after he had admitted the illness was real. (I have been informed by contacts in Pincher Creek that in the months after this statement a few of the people affected committed suicide.)

Faced with officials who verbally acknowledged the concern, but with apparent ruthlessness were allowing the irresponsible statements to continue, despite recognizing the validity of the illness, I felt I had no choice but to appeal to the opposition critics, to the Standing Committee on Health and Welfare, and to the Chief Commissioner of the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

Each of these parties were informed of the concern about what Health and Welfare Officials were saying, informed of the unsubstantiated nature of the officials' comments, of the resulting devastation of peoples' lives, and of the apparent unwillingness of Mr. Mulroney or the cabinet minister responsible to put an end to the carnage.

The Standing Committee asked Health and Welfare Officials to respond to my concern 22 June 1988. Two officials testified, but as the Chairman of the Committee pointed out at the end of their testimony, they didn't respond to the concern I had raised.

Sheila Copps wrote an open letter to Mr. Epp, but in his reply he did not address any of the four points she raised in her letter. Margaret Mitchell asked a question in the House of Commons, but in a written reply Mr. Epp didn't address either suggestion she had made, relating to research and public education.

Maxwell Yalden, of the CHRC, wrote Mr. Epp saying we "owe it" to people with the problem to be more vocal in letting Canadians know about the legitimacy of their concerns. Mr. Epp replied but once again ignored concerns arising from public misconceptions created by his officials.

Meanwhile, some Health and Welfare officials continue to express their bigotry, and, every once in a while, some Canadian disabled by pollution gives up in disgust at this government's cruelty.

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